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ABSTRACT

If people can evoke mental images when listening to a story, they can extend the process by turning words on a printed page into speech and evoke images for the "speech on the page." This is an exercise for reading comprehension that does not come naturally but can be worked on deliberately. A few moments of self-observation, when beginning to read a book or an article or when listening to someone talk about something that happened, may yield the awareness of how the first image comes. If teachers can focus on what they do when they read or when they listen to someone speak (because of the inextricable relationship between reading and speaking) and then transfer this into approaches to teaching reading, perhaps they would really help students to read with comprehension. At times problems arise when the material is presented in a style unfamiliar to the reader. In such cases, the grammatical constructions, because they are different from ones habitually used by the person when speaking, interfere with the evocation of images. In these cases students may need help acquiring experience either with subject matter, specialized vocabulary, or different language styles. (NKA)

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Imagery and Comprehension

by Rose Ortiz

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If I close my eyes and try to hear a voice, mine or someone else's, I notice that I see myself or the person whose voice I'm trying to hear. It's as though for me thinking cannot take place without mental images. Most of the time this happens so quickly that I don't catch myself creating or evoking images for my thoughts, but if I try to do an exercise like closing my eyes and remembering my mother's first name, I see my mother first then her name comes. I know that when I listen to the radio, I have images for the people I hear. I went to a radio station after listening to it for two years and people were walking around talking. I heard the familiar voices, but had a strange sensation seeing the people out of whom these voices were coming. I expected them to look like the people I imagined them to be.

Also, when I listen, whether it be to the radio or to someone talking, I have noticed that I can "see" what they are saying. For example, when someone describes going to a party, if I know the person well and know where the party is, I can "picture" the room or house and the people in it. If I don't know the person too well or don't know the house, I realize that I picture not the house of the party, but a house where I've been for a party, and if that house isn't appropriate, I choose another. I've also noticed that if I don't picture any house, I'm not so much with the person who is speaking as I am when I do.

In a reading class that I teach at Staten Island Community College, I made up the following story: One day I went to the beach. It was very cold and deserted. Suddenly I spotted an old man. He seemed to be carrying a cane and looked very tired and weak. He had holes in his clothing and holes in his hat which was all out of shape. His whiskers were so long that it looked like he hadn't shaved in weeks. As I got closer, he began to look different. He changed somehow into a young, exciting looking, strong, handsome man wearing a football jersey which had a number on it. What was the number?

All of my students had a number. Going around the room each said a different number. At the part where the old man turned into the young one, everyone smiled including me. I had no idea where the story would go. All I knew when I began was that I wanted to tell a story which would be strong in imagery and might end with a twist. I wanted the twist in hopes of seeing their reactions—smiles, laughter or puzzled looks. They stayed with the story and each provided a number.

These students, most of whom have been labeled as having comprehension problems, didn't have any problems comprehending my story. Afterwards I asked them to report what they had noticed about themselves while listening to my story. Each said that he or she had seen an old man. Some said he was drunk. For some he was black, for others white. When the old man changed into a young one they said that they could drop the old one and replace him with the young one. They replaced him either with someone they knew who played football or with a professional player. Some even described the colors of the uniform. When I asked which beach they had seen there were as many answers as people: South Beach, Jones Beach, Coney Island, Rockaway, Manhattan Beach, no beach—instead a river bank, or a beach at a lake.

I gave this exercise because I know that if people can evoke mental images when listening to a story, they can evoke mental images by turning words on a printed page into speech and evoke images for the "speech" on the page. In fact I followed up this story exercise by asking them to read a short passage about a boy playing on a beach. I hadn't planned it that way, but while telling the story I had remembered that the book of passages we were using contained one about a boy on a beach. I asked them to read the passage to themselves and try to make mental pictures for each sentence they read. (I knew that some

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might have trouble decoding, or sounding out some of the words, and this also needs to be taken into account because it may affect comprehension.) If they noticed the picture getting fuzzy, or if they lost it entirely, they should stop, reread the sentence and recreate the image.

Afterwards they reported their experiences. For some this was the first time they had read a piece and understood it after the first reading. Others said that doing this made it easier to concentrate on the passage. One said that he'd noticed that when a piece was interesting, he would picture it automatically, but if it wasn't interesting, he wouldn't see it. When I asked whether he found this piece interesting he said, "Well, it was alright, but you told us to picture it so I did. I bet if I tried to picture other stories that weren't interesting, I could remember them too."

The fact is that it doesn't happen automatically. Some people have greater reading facility than others. They do it so well that sensing or picturing a story appears to happen automatically the way walking, after doing it for many years, seems to be automatic. A few moments of self-observation, when beginning a book or article or when you begin to listen to someone talk about something that happened when you weren't there, may yield the awareness of how the first image comes. When the speaker starts, your mind may be somewhere else and then suddenly you realize that you want to listen—so you turn on the "set." If the subject or place talked about is familiar, it is harder to catch that moment, but when it is unfamiliar, take the time to observe!

For me evoking images when I read was not automatic. It wasn't until I noticed that I could retain what people say by creating images that I realized that I might use imagery as a means of retaining stories, articles or novels once I had turned them into speech. If I can do that, why not create three dimensional mental images for things I read about in biology, physics, chemistry or mathematics? Mathematicians and scientists who must retain complicated mathematical abstractions tell me that they need to make up or construct images in order to understand particular concepts. None of this happens automatically. It is and can be worked on deliberately.

Once I noticed this, reading became a very different experience. I could understand when and why I hadn't read with comprehension. It was no longer a hit or miss game which varied according to the material. It wasn't until I studied with Dr. Caleb Gattegno,* to become a teacher of reading, that I understood the inextricable relationship between reading and speaking, and began to focus very closely on what it was that allowed me to retain what people said. Once I realized that it wasn't words I remembered but meanings in the form of images, I was able to transfer this image-making process from my listening to my own reading. Readers with even more skill have learned, with certain material, to go from the text to the image without vocalizing or subvocalizing, and might be less inclined to value the speech-to-image relationship. But even they might concede that sometimes when they read a really interesting novel they feel as though they are watching a movie; they "get so into the story that they can't put it down." I had never had this experience until several years after I had completed college. I never got lost in a book. I was always vividly aware of the separation between myself and the books I read. I had to read and reread almost everything because I hadn't been aware of what I was doing when I did comprehend—when it happened it was accidental, never deliberate. Perhaps if I had made reading a habit when I was a child, I would have discovered it many years ago and would have expected it to come automatically to me too. If I have trouble now with a particular text, I could blame it on the author, who in some cases, of course, is to blame.

It is often stated that people whose parents read to them as children tend to have fewer reading problems than people whose parents didn't. The former experienced literary language orally. In some cases they were encouraged to "look at the pretty pictures" and when there were none, to make up their own. I can still remember books that were read to me as a child; one recollection is of little bears walking around a house. Of course they never left the page, but I can at will think about the bears and see them walking around. I can also "see" Little Red Riding Hood walking through a forest and then talking to a wolf dressed up as her grandmother. Though I've never seen a film or show of Little Red Riding Hood, I carry an animated version in my mind.

Despite many childhood experiences like these, I still had problems reading with comprehension. Why? Perhaps because I didn't look at the words as my mother read, but only at the pictures when she turned the book my way. I didn't notice on my own that words in a book should be read with the melody and intonation of speech and my mother, not being a teacher of reading, hadn't known that this was cru-

* Dr. Gattegno is the originator of an approach to literacy called "Words in Color," and the author of many books, among them: *What We Owe Children: The Subordination of Teaching to Learning* (New York, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970). *In the Beginning There Were No Words: The Universe of Babies* (New York, Educational Solutions, Inc. 80 Fifth Ave., 10011, 1973), *Towards a Visual Culture* (New York, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1969), and *The Common Sense of Teaching Mathematics* (New York, Educational Solutions, 1974).

"I don't have to teach comprehension. They learned to comprehend if they speak the language."

cial. My teachers in school did not seem to know any better. They did not do the job of communicating the process to me, or they assumed that I understood it. Well I hadn't. And in the few cases when I had, for example, when required to read plays or other dialogue, I was so worried that I might make a mistake that I didn't give my attention to creating images.

When someone speaks to me I turn on the T V set in my mind. If my set is off the imagery stops and so does the comprehension. Either I stay with the image or I drift off. Sometimes one image triggers another and I'm off in my own world. A colleague of mine remembers that when he was in a high school math class, his teacher did the following problem: If a man's barn is 10 yards long and 13 yards wide and he walks around it 5 times how far does he go? The story of the problem was so much more interesting to him that in his mind he was on a farm and not with the mathematics.

If my students heard the beach story and wandered off to the time when they were on the beach, when such and such happened, they wouldn't have been with my story. People call this concentration. I can't remember how many times teachers said to me, you don't comprehend what you read because you don't concentrate. That was not concrete enough. I would try to concentrate, but on what? The number of pages in the book? The size of the print? The spellings of the words on the page? The meaning, when it didn't connect to my own experience and I didn't realize that I'd have to do the connecting, or that sometimes I'd have to work harder than others to evoke an image? Concentrate on the fact that I was dumb and therefore couldn't comprehend? Concentrate on the fact that I was reading too slowly and sometimes meaning came and at other times it didn't?

If teachers can focus on what they do when they read or when they listen to someone speak or read aloud and then transfer this or translate it into approaches to teaching reading, perhaps they would really help students to read with comprehension rather than leave it all to chance.

I once worked with a 16-year-old student who had barely learned to read. More specifically, he had a very limited sight vocabulary and all reading for him was a hit or miss processs. After some preliminary work, he decoded the sentence *Mom and Dad met Tom.* He read this devoid of intonation and unlike his normal speech. He read one word at a time, "Mom–and–Dad–met–Tom." When I asked him to say it faster, once again devoid of normal speech quality, but a bit faster he said, "Mom-and-Dad-met-Tom."

"Faster."

"Mom - and - Dad - met - Tom." (His face almost expressionless, staring into space.)

"Faster."

(Same, only faster.)

"Even Faster."

(Same.)

"Now like you speak."

"Mom and Dad, Mom and Dad! How did they get here?"

His face lit up, he turned to check the door, it was as if these words were reserved only for when he actually saw his parents. Speaking their names seemed to trigger an image so strong that he checked the door and said, "How did they get here?" The connection was made. Certainly other work needed to be done: decoding, becoming familiar with all the signs (spellings) of English, the conventions of written English and other conventions of reading–but he certainly did not have to wait until after he'd been decoding for some time to work on "reading comprehension." In fact, it would have been harmful and a waste of his time not to have read with comprehension from the start.

Popular methods used by teachers of reading include asking students to act out stories or plays they read, draw diagrams, describe characters, read a text while listening to a recorded version of it, etc. Teachers may do the right things, but often don't know why they work. When I ask them why they assign these exercises, their answers vary: "the kids enjoy it," "it makes reading fun," "it brings it to life." But why does it bring it to life? It does so because it helps students to call upon an ability they have–the power to evoke mental images when listening to speech. But this may not be transferred to reading, because they have not been made aware of what it is that they do. Some people are capable of coping with fiction or general nonfiction but are stumped when confronted with more technical kinds of writing. So one may find people who are very competent readers of fiction but cannot get through a textbook. They have not been able to make the transfer from one kind of material to the other, because they are not fully aware of what they do when they listen or read well.

In some cases the listener or reader may not have the images to evoke. This usually occurs with unfa-

miliar words or with material which is out of his or her experience, astrophysics for example. This is a problem different from the one I have been describing. In one case the person has the images but has not made the connection. In the other, there are no images to connect with. They must be invented.

Another problem arises when material is presented in a style unfamiliar to the listener or reader. In such cases the grammatical constructions, because they are different from ones habitually used by the person when speaking, interfere with the evocation of images.

In these cases I may need to help students acquire experience either with subject matter, specialized vocabulary or different language styles. I do not have to teach comprehension. They've learned how to comprehend if they speak the language. I don't have to teach them to use their powers of imagery; they use them all the time; for example, when I say draw a picture of a horse, although none is in the room, they can put one on paper. What I can do is create exercises like that of acting out a story or drawing pictures for sentences, or ask them to tune in the TV sets of their minds and help them to transfer, to the task of reading, what they do while listening.

I'm amazed at the number of teachers who create exercises for highlighting the relationship between imagery and writing, but are skeptical about doing the same for the relationship between imagery and reading with comprehension.